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BETTER LIVING CONDITIONS FOR EMPLOYES AND THEIR RELATION TO STABILITY IN EMPLOYMENT

BY JOHN IHLDER,
Secretary, Philadelphia Housing Commission.

The keen and rapidly growing interest that employers today take in the improvement of living conditions for employes probably is due chiefly to two causes: first, an awakened social conscience, and second, and largely due to the first, a more intelligent and far-seeing selfishness. As in any great social change there are, of course, also many minor contributing causes, some of immediate or emotional appeal. There is no question, for instance, that some of the most recent housing operations by industrial concerns are due to a scarcity of labor and an inability to get or retain laborers unless good dwellings are provided for them and their families. This is particularly true of the rapidly expanded munitions plants. But their example has had a powerful influence upon other employers, not only as an example but as being the only means of successful competition in the labor market. With this has gone the emotional appeal of Americanization.

So evident are these latter, and as I believe, minor causes, that, to many persons, even including some of the employers who are building houses, they seem the major causes. And so at least the second is if stripped of its immediate and temporary appeal and properly related to the two great major causes that for years before the outbreak of the European War had been slowly changing the employer's attitude of indifference toward conditions outside his factory walls.

This attitude of indifference, in America at least, was not the original attitude. History does not exactly repeat itself, but it does seem to work in an ascending spiral, bringing us again to situations analogous to those through which we have passed. When America left the age of homespun and entered upon the industrial era it had before it the horrible example of England, pioneer of industrialism. Among those who founded the first textile mills of New England were men who had seen with their own eyes not only

the moral and physical havoc wrought upon transplanted country people in the English industrial towns, but also the first inspiring attempt of Robert Owen to work out a better system. Reinforcing this lesson was the difficulty of securing factory employees in America unless they were assured of good living conditions. For practically the only source of factory labor then was the farm.

Another interesting analogy between these beginnings of American industry and the present is that America then as now was greatly influenced by a general European War. The embargo of 1807 had cut off the importation of textiles. Its repeal and the enactment of the non-intercourse act in 1809, which still shut England and France from our markets, was almost equally effective in its encouragement of home manufacture. Before the end of the War of 1812, American industry was firmly established.

The change that these years brought about is indicated in a report made in 1810 by Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury, "that about two thirds of the clothing, including hosiery, and of the house and table linen worn and used by the inhabitants of the United States who do not reside in cities, is the product of family manufactures." Meanwhile, within two years, the number of spindles in cotton mills increased from 8,000 to 80,000, and shoe, hat and other factories grew in numbers and in size. Such was already the sequence of the cotton mill established at the falls of the Pawtucket in 1790. No wonder that Tench Coxe in his report (1814) prefaced his statistical tables of American manufactures with a panegyric. "These wonderful machines," he declaims, "working as if they were animated beings, endowed with all the talents of their inventors, laboring with organs that never tire, and subject to no expense of food, or bed, or raiment, or dwelling, may be justly considered as equivalent to an immense body of manufacturing recruits suddenly enlisted in the service of the country."

This enthusiasm is undimmed by any premonitions. And at the time there was little ground for premonitions. The growth of the new industries meant no huddling of low paid workers in already overcrowded cities. The earlier mills depended upon water-power, so their influence was against rather than toward the concentration of population in the cities. The first mill, though built by Providence capital, was not in Providence but some distance away at the falls of the Pawtucket. Its Rhode Island successors were scattered

along the streams that empty into Narragansett bay. In Massachusetts, early industry had the same decentralizing influence. Though it contributed to the wealth of the old commercial cities, it did not bring in its thousands of workers.

Because the primary need of the new mills was water-power, they were established in the open country. Because there were no houses for the employes, the building and management of mill houses was an essential part of the enterprise. And because the only available supply of labor was the Yankee farmer and especially the Yankee farmer's daughter, the houses were well built and the management above serious criticism—except perhaps for its strictness. Especially over the large boarding houses provided for their girl operatives did the mill managers exercise an oversight that was really paternal. They were most careful in the selection of housekeepers who were to stand *in loco parentis*. They saw to it that the houses were well kept, that the food was good. They made and enforced rules of conduct. Not only must the girls be in at a certain hour in the evening, but they must attend church on Sunday.

The family dwellings were not so strictly supervised, but they were well built and well maintained. Some of the first village mill houses are still occupied by mill workers and are still excellent dwellings, the chief criticism that may be made of them being their lack of modern sanitary equipment and, perhaps, a lack of sufficient window space in attic bedrooms.

But water-power as then developed was unreliable. Coal came to be, and still is in some of the oldest mills, a supplementary source of power. Then mills were built which depended upon coal alone. These new mills were no longer scattered along the valleys but were grouped at transportation points. Some of the first mill villages still remain villages, but others have grown into cities: Pawtucket, Lowell, Lawrence. Others have disappeared, their strength gone to swell that of some larger community. So industry brought not only its wealth but its workers to the cities, or by concentrating developed cities where only villages had been before.

With this change came what virtually amounted to a transformation in the living conditions of the mill workers. In the old days there had been a continuance of the friendly, neighborly relation between the employer and the employe that marked the preceding era of the small shop. In the early days of Lowell mill girls

visited the family of the manager. The employes had organizations designed to advance them in their work, like the Middlesex Mechanics' Association, and the girls had reading clubs. Those of Lowell even wrote and published a magazine from 1840 to 1849. This was, in some ways, the golden age of American industry, an age in which employer and employe had a common heritage, had standards which, if not identical, were at least like enough so that each could understand the other's. Wages were comparatively high. The girls, who formed the great majority of the operatives, usually came to the mills for a few years only, lived, while there, under good conditions, and then returned to their farms. The men looked forward to advancement.

But when villages changed to cities all else changed. Houses were built by others than the companies. First to feel the effect were the boarding houses. Girls who resented the strict supervision of the boarding housekeepers moved into private quarters. To take their places outsiders were admitted. Then the housekeepers complained that they could make no profit, so two or three houses were combined under one management and boarders who lodged elsewhere were admitted to the dining-room. Discipline necessarily suffered and finally the mill managements closed most of their boarding houses.

With the family dwellings a similar but less pronounced change took place. The desire for greater independence led many men to rent or buy houses erected by the speculative builder, even though the cost was much greater than that of the mill houses. So great did this defection become that some of the mills were forced to take as tenants families who had no connection with the industry. Others converted their dwellings into store houses. Others sold. Almost immediately rents went up, doubled and trebled. For the mill houses had not been, and usually are not now, operated on a profit-making basis.

While this was going on a new element came into the life of the industrial communities and hastened the change. Though Coxe in his panegyric had proclaimed that the new machinery which was taking the place of the old hand looms might be considered as equivalent to an immense body of manufacturing recruits, there had been difficulty from the beginning in securing enough workers to tend this new machinery. One of the chief concerns of the

earlier manufacturers had been to prove to the New England country girl that factory life would not lower her in her self respect or in the respect of others. So the coming of immigrants was hailed. The first of these were English and Scotch. Then came the Irish, whose numbers were swelled by the great famine in the middle of the century. After them came the French Canadians and, more recently, the peoples from southern and eastern Europe and from Asia.

Each of these groups of aliens has more or less completely pushed its predecessor out of the lower paid and less skilled positions. Coinciding as their coming did with the weakening of the mill house system and with the concentration of industries, it has aided in the transformation of the older industrial communities of the East and has been a potent factor in preventing the development of similar communities in the newer parts of the country. Even with the English operatives there was no longer a feeling of a common heritage or common traditions between employer and employed. With the coming of the Irish, with their lower standards of living, their untidy shacks and hovels, the gulf widened. And when to the Irish there succeeded the Latins, Slavs and Asiatics, the gulf became seemingly impassable. Then the theory that the employer has no concern in the living conditions of his employes gained credence. Then developed the Lawrence, the Lowell, the Pittsburgh, the South Chicago that we know today.

Coming as they did when economic forces had already weakened the old human relationship between employer and employe, these peoples of different standards, of different traditions, of different tongues, confirmed an inclination on the employer's part to shake off a responsibility that had ceased to give satisfaction and had grown irksome. For it must be remembered that the owners of even the earlier mills were often not residents of the mill villages. The founder of the first mill, at Pawtucket, lived in Providence, not very far away but still in a different environment. The founders of Lowell, present owners of the great mills at Lowell and Lawrence, lived in Boston. While their employes were Americans there was a bond that bridged distance. When their employes became aliens the bond disappeared.

Such generalizations are, of course, subject to exceptions. As many of the villages did not grow to be cities, so many of the mill

owners did and do live in or near the village or the city where their wealth is produced. When this is true in a village, living conditions are likely to be better because of it, though even then there remains the gulf between native and alien. In the cities the presence of the employer has been of less effect. There his responsibility has been more obscured. It is even more than a question whether, during the past generation, his active intervention would not have been resented. The antagonism between labor and capital, the development of the stock company, the desire for independence on the worker's part, the lack of desire for responsibility on the part of the employer or manager, the prospect of gain for the land owner and the speculative builder, these among other motives tended to make him set the boundary of his interest at the mill gates.

But facts are stronger than theories or inclinations. Because of theories and inclinations slums have spread through our cities; new industrial communities have become not only objects of scorn, but of deep anxiety. Plainly the employer's concern for the employe cannot cease at the gates of the mill but must follow him home. Had the immigrant of foreign tongue arrived earlier, before the mill house system had begun to break down, before the industrial city had appeared, had he come in smaller numbers so that his value would have been greater and so that he might have been absorbed into existing communities instead of establishing new ones of his own, our industrial history might have been quite different. Whether, ultimately, it would have been better is another question, for the old system was paternalistic to an extreme degree, and had the Latin and the Slav been subjected to it at the time of its greatest strength the effect might have been lasting.

Today, faced with the fact that a *laissez faire* policy is, in the long run, unworkable, we have also the experience that paternalism is not workable. This is important because the first instinct of those who have power, when inspired to use that power for the benefit of others, is to use it paternalistically. Pullman came half a century after the New England pioneers. And he has his successors today. We must find another way. To be sure there have endured in New England mill villages, founded in the early days of American industry, that still maintain a paternalistic system. There are even neighboring villages of comparatively recent origin that have taken up the tradition. But their owners seldom speak of

them with enthusiasm. Their usual statement is that only because of force of circumstances do they own and manage dwellings. Meanwhile the proprietors of other industries, finding their old quarters within a city cramped and unsuited to present needs, are moving to the outskirts or to small towns and villages. Often with them one motive has been the conditions under which their employes were forced to live. The owners of still other industries find that, because of the growth of manufacturing enterprises, there are not enough dwellings in the city for the employes of all.

So, for one cause or another, the question has again forced itself upon the employer's attention as it had not since the beginning of the past century. Better living conditions for employes must be provided. But how it is to be done is still far from settled. Some of the new communities are but unimaginative duplicates of those which demonstrated their unworkableness nearly a hundred years ago. Others, however, are experiments, more or less cautious, in newer methods. The most common of these is for the company to build houses and sell them on easy terms to its employes. Yet experience has shown that this is but a temporary solution of the problem. Another is the organization of a subsidiary company which buys, builds, sells and rents. Proposed, but not yet carried to completion, are schemes of a coöperative character.

So we are today in an experimental stage. We are faced by the fact that *laissez faire* will not do. We have had experience which teaches us that paternalism will not endure and that its end is bitterness. All we know is that it is to the benefit of the community and to the direct and continuing profit of industry that employes be well housed, that they live under good conditions. Even on this we have not, for America, scientific proof. The proof we have is that for more than a century some firms have continued to provide dwellings for their employes, though they would gladly be quit of the work and the responsibility; that other employers are beginning to do the same thing, though they undertake the enterprise with reluctance; that still other employers in seeking new sites for their plants, make as one of their conditions that the neighborhood of the new site provide good housing conditions for their workers.

Yet when one seeks facts from these men he finds either that they have no facts, have acted merely from business sense and the

untabulated lessons of experience, or that they are reluctant to disclose the facts. As one of the motives of some employers in providing housing is to secure a greater degree of control over labor, the reluctance in such cases to disclose facts is understandable. Moreover, there is today no complete or even fairly complete list of American firms that house and aid in housing their employes. In 1904 the Federal Bureau of Labor (as it was then) published a report on *The Housing of Working People in the United States By Employers*. It listed sixteen companies and said, "It has not been possible to ascertain that other establishments in the United States have been engaged to any great extent in similar work, although every effort was made to cover the field as thoroughly as possible." This list was inadequate even for its time. Since then other lists have been published, each adding to the number of firms. And in nearly every case firms are listed for the first time that had been engaged in this work for many years. The latest list contains seventy names, one of them that of the United States Steel Corporation, which alone controls several towns.

This inability to secure even a list indicates how isolated each experiment has been. Those in close proximity to each other doubtless have taught each other, though usually what they have taught has been learned by rote rather than assimilated, for there is a likeness about neighboring industrial communities that is disheartening. But of one thing their managers are all convinced, though the figures to prove it are not available: good housing lessens the number of strikes and causes a marked decrease in the labor turnover. That is the business end. It is the immediate consideration. Whether good housing decreases the amount of sickness they do not know. They have not thought much about it. That it makes the men more contented they believe.

At the present time the Department of Labor is making another investigation of the housing of employes. Perhaps its report will contain the data we need to lift the question from one of moral certainty to one of demonstrated fact.